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Literature and Emigration

In the villages of Mount Lebanon, there is a special category of land that still keeps its name from the beginning of the century. Actually one can find this name in nearly all the villages. "The land of the return". This is how the Lebanese villagers named the pieces of land bought by emigrants in the Americas who were dreaming of the moment they could come back home from the New World.

The name is still there, "this is the land of the return of so-and-so", a villager will tell you in the year 2004, and when you try to ask about the emigrant after whom the land was named, no one will have the answer, as if the name of the piece of land had become its owner, and the memory of the tragic nostalgia that haunted the emigrants had become a geographic reality.

The story of the Lebanese emigration is a long one; it actually began in the late 19th century with the crisis of the silk industry, reached its peak after World War I and the terrible hunger that dominated the Lebanon.

A total destruction of the agriculture of the blackberry tree, with the emergence of industrial silk, and a society dominated by poverty and social disorder lead to a total social change where one third of the Lebanese population died from starvation, another third emigrated, and what was left behind was a remnant of a people.

This is not a special Lebanese case, one can see something similar happening in Syria and in Palestine, as if the so-called "Fertile Crescent" had to begin its relationship with modern times through the memory of social catastrophes.

But intellectual emigration began some time before the massive one towards the Americas. By the end of the nineteenth century Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals began their voyage towards Egypt. Lebanon and Syria were at that time under Ottoman rule, whereas Egypt was under the Muḥammad ʿAlī dynasty, which lost the independence of the country to the British Empire.

In my paper I will try to introduce the impact of these two emigrations on the development of Modern Arabic literature and on the turning point of both the *Nahḍa* (Renaissance) and the *Ḥadātha* (Modernism).

One of the major figures of the *Nahḍa* is the Lebanese writer Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq (1804-1887), a Christian Maronite who converted to Islam after the assassination of his brother by the Maronite clergy because of his Protestant tendencies. Although al-Shidyāq was the first translator of the Bible, and his major work was, like for all the *Nahḍāwīs*, in the project of appropriating the Arabic language and its modernization, on the other hand he managed to open a new chapter in literature through his formless prose. He wrote in a combination of the *maqāma*, the literature of voyages and autobiography. The importance and innovation of his prose would be rediscovered with the Post-Maḥfūzian Arabic novel, when the writers in the seventies and eighties came to innovative forms in the novel based upon the relationship between the memory of the tale and the realities of the language of the present.

In al-Shidyāq's life story two aspects emerge:

1. The image of the writer as a traveler, whose errancy will lead him from Malta to France, to Egypt, to Istanbul. A man who became homeless and whose life-story is based upon the combination of discovery and nostalgia.
2. The marginal, whose religious beliefs are doubted to the point that his body receives tomb in a no man's land, and is neglected in his home village. For the Christians he is a Muslim, and for the Muslims he is a Christian. This lead to him being ignored outside the curriculum in the Lebanese schools.

The story of Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq can help us understand the atmosphere of the second half of the nineteenth century that lead to a massive intellectual emigration towards Egypt. In the experience of this emigration, the ideology of enlightenment dominated and new forms were created. Jirjī Zaydān (1861-1914) initiated the historical novel, Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874-1922) played a major role in creating the didactic novel, and the new wave of journalism was created by immigrants like the Taqlā's, who created *al-Ahrām* (1876) which stayed the most prestigious newspaper in Cairo until our days.

Badī'a Maṣābnī innovated the belly dance while Najīb al-Rīḥānī turned into the creator of the modern comedy.

In their Egyptian emigration the Lebanese writers, artists and journalists stayed in the continuity of the Arabic language on the one hand, and in the same sphere of cultural and literary questions on the other. It was a kind of interior emigration, as one can say, a journey inside the same linguistic and cultural atmosphere which had its roots in the emigration of Ibn Khaldūn (†1406) or Ibn 'Arabī (†1240) from the Maghrib to the Mashriq, and of which we can still find traces in artists like Āsyā Dāghir or Yūsuf Shāhīn and 'Umar al-Sharīf ...

Parallel to this emigration and in the beginning of the new century, a new wave began to take place, but this time to the far west, to both North and South America. A massive immigration that created the image of the *turco* in the Latin American literature and established the poet-merchant as a prototype for the thousands of Lebanese men and women who went to the New World in order to be able to return and reestablish their lives in their Old World.

In North America, a literary heritage was created by the *Rābi'a al-Qalamiyya*, initiated by Khalīl Jibrān (1883-1931) and Mīkhā'il Nu'ayma (1889-1989), whereas *al-Uṣba al-Andalusiyya* was created by a group of writers and poets like al-Shā'ir al-Qarawī (Rashīd Salīm al-Khūrī, 1887-1984).

The North American heritage would continue to be effective until the fifties, when the Syro-Lebanese poet Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917-1987) returned from New York, where he had been the editor in chief of the prestigious Arabic Newspaper *al-Hudā*, and established in Beirut the *Shi'r* review which would eventually lead a major literary revolution and open the doors to the translations of European and American poetry to Arabic, mainly T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman.

The Mahjarī Literature (the literature of emigration) played an essential role in the modern literary movement on three levels:

1. The Romantic language, which was created in a new revolutionary approach. The influence of William Blake and Nietzsche on Jibrān created a combination of social and poetic revolt in the literary group lead by him in America. One can say that Romanticism took its shape in Lebanon and Egypt through the works of Ilyās Abū Shabaka (1903-1947) and Aḥmad Zakī Abū Shādī (1892-1955),

and this may be true. But with the Jibrānī new prose and poetry, modern Arabic literature was able to achieve a new simple poetic language. The ambiguity of Jibrān and his diversity as a poet, painter, novelist and essayist opened up the possibilities for him to behave as if he were rediscovering the continent of literature which had paved the way for him as a way of embodying both a social revolution and a prophetic voice.

2. The social change in the struggle against both the feudal system and the influence of the Christian Maronite Church. The voice of Khalīl Jibrān was a turning point in introducing the concept of social cultural revolution in modern Arabic literature. Although one can now say that the Romantic approach of this voice dominated the idea of revolution itself, as if it were limiting it to the realm of writing only, stories like *Khalīl al-kāfir* (Khalil the Atheist) or *Yuhannā al-majnūn* (The Mad Yuhanna) and a love story like *al-Ajniḥa al-mutakassira* (The Broken Wings) are major signs of a change towards social engagement and a rupture with the dominant idea about the role of the poet-writer as a *mudabbir*, or consultant-writer of the emir or landlord.

The new writer, who is lonely, living through his words and with them, was not created in the land of emigration, but rather an outcome of a huge socio-cultural change in the Arab Mashriq. Writers after the trips to Europe, under the influence of translations, through the independent press and the modern school began to take on a new shape. It was no longer that of the Sheikh, but rather that of a modern lawyer or scholar. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1888-1956) published the first modern Romantic novel in Cairo in 1913, and then the model of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973) and ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād (1889-1964) made it possible for a new intellectual related to the university or the press to emerge.

In this sense the new writer in the Americas was part of a movement in the homeland, his project was to return, and maybe he alone was going to be able to achieve a relationship with the piece of land called “return” because his land were his texts.

3. The emergence of a new criticism with Mīkhā’il Nu‘ayma in his book *al-Ghirbāl*, which introduced new terms and new approaches in the sphere of literary criticism.

Here also, one can not separate this critical movement from the one that was taking place in the Mashriq. New critical and linguistic approaches began with Jirjī Zaydān in Egypt and developed to become part of the innovation of literary forms in both poetry and novels.

These three elements will turn the first massive literary emigration to a foreign land into an integral part of the search of the Arab Mashriq for its *Nahḍa* (Renaissance) and *Inbī'āth* (Resurrection), these two vague terms that dominated the Arab Mashriq since the second half of the nineteenth century. The idea of renaissance will put the stress on the linguistic innovation, and on the appropriation of the golden Abbāsīd language with the dominant figure of the poet al-Mutanabbī (†965). The idea of resurrection will pave the way during the fifties of the last century for the massive use of the ancient symbols and myths (under the influence of the poetry of T. S. Eliot). Thus an unseen link with the classical poet or writer was created.

Khalīl Jibrān was the first poet to find the lost link with the idea of the prophet-poet, which is an essential part of the paradigm in the classical Arabic literature. In his book *The Prophet*, written in English, the Lebanese poet incarnated this image as a kind of reproduction of the classical paradigm: The poet, prophet, and king.

This model will continue to reproduce itself in the modern Arabic poetry, as if the revolution against the classical Arabic model of poetry contained what the Tunisian critic Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Yūsufī calls the echoing between the texts. From Imru' al-Qays (6th century), the poet king, to al-Mutanabbī, the poet prophet trying to become a king, the paradigm will take its archeological mythical dimension with Adam, believed by the Arabs to be the first poet prophet.

Khalīl Jibrān, in his revolt against the beliefs and social practice of the Christian Maronite Church in Lebanon, was able to create a link with the Arabic prose of the Middle Ages, which crossed the very limited borders between religion and literature in the so-called fantastic prose and the stories of the prophets. Although the Jibrānī breakthrough took place in the frame of the Christian symbols (related to a minority in the Arab Mashriq), he paved a new way that was to be reshaped by the literary image of Jesus that we can find in the poetry of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926-1964) and Maḥmūd Darwīsh (*1941).

This breakthrough would be rationalized with the critical work of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and will reach its peak with the allegorical novel of Najīb Maḥfūz (*1911) *Awlād ḥaritna* (1959).

In the South American experience one can pick up the significance of the name of the Arab literary circle that was created there: *al-ʿUṣba al-Andalusiyya*, “the Andalusian Group”. Although the poetry produced by the members of this group stayed in the Romantic approach and innovated poetry through trying to introduce a new language based upon the image, rather than what the modernizers understood as the rhetoric structure of poetry, what one can point out is the significance of the name. Living in the Hispanic world, they understood that their experience was a kind of revival of the Andalusian renaissance and tolerance.

Unfortunately, they missed two things:

1. That the Arab Andalusian heritage was to become a leading model in the works of many Latin American writers, Borges with his new structuring of the story, García Márquez with the impact of the *Arabian Nights* on his novels, and Amado with the figure of the *turco* in his works.
2. Whereas the Andalusian myth was to become part of the myth of loss, it was also Palestine in the poetry of Maḥmūd Darwīsh, and this would reproduce itself in many modern literary works.

The literature of emigration was, as we have seen, a kind of return, the nostalgic aspect reflected itself in the romanticizing of the Lebanese village and in the creation of a kind of a mythical literature that was going to find its voice later with the symbolic Romanticism of Saʿīd ʿAql (*1912) and with the colloquial poetry of Michel Ṭrād (1912-1998) and the Raḥbānī brothers.

The voice and plays of Fayrūz incarnated this approach and created the modern myth of Lebanon. But here one must be careful; the voice of Fayrūz and her songs mystified Palestine and Damascus in the same way as they had done in the Lebanese context.

Two questions must be tackled here:

1. What was the impact of the Lebanese Civil War 1840-1860 on the Mahjarī literature?

2. What American or European influences did these Mahjarī writers bring to the Arabic culture?

I am not sure that there is evidence that can help us answer the first question. The first Lebanese Civil War that spread to Damascus has entered in the unspoken since a long time. We can find only hints about it in the work of writers that witnessed it, like Shākir al-Khūrī (†1913), but the major writers of the second half of the nineteenth century preferred silence and filled this silence with a national rhetoric.

Nearly the same thing happened in the Americas, the terrible memories of the Civil War were replaced by a kind of modern secular non-religious discourse. Even the experience of the famine of Mount Lebanon during World War One had to wait until the thirties and the new realistic approach of Tawfīq Yūsuf ‘Awwād (1911-1989) in his novel *al-Raghīf* (A Loaf of Bread).

This gives us the answer to our next question, and we will discover that the Romantic discourse was going to dominate this literature. Although Jibrān went to Paris and Nu‘ayma visited Russia, we will not find any influence of the naturalistic and/or realistic literature in these writers. They actually lived in a world of their own. They were poets even in their prose, and the influence of the modern western literary movement was very small.

How can we then analyze this emigration, what was it, and what was its relationship with the tough experience of the moving merchants who lived the experience of strangers, most of them failing in the end their goal of returning and building a house in the land of “return”?

In his book *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said speaks about three categories: Emigrants, refugees and exiles. Although he didn’t come to create a precise differentiation between these three terms, he tried to introduce his personal experience as a Palestinian writer, as being part of the three categories all at the same time.

Said uses a text by George Steiner in order to formulate his idea about the literary impact of exile:

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which had made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic [...] (quoted in Said 2001: 174).

But, unfortunately, he didn't study the literature of emigration, and he would have refused my proposal to read his literary work as a continuation and rupture with this literature.

But on the other hand one can not but read the modern Palestinian literature in the light of the exile experience, and the work of Imīl Ḥabībī (1921-1996) can only be understood in the light of the category of "transcendental homelessness" as defined by Lukács.

The nostalgic aspect became a tragic personal story, as in the case of the death of the poet Rāshid Ḥusayn (1936-1977), burned in his room in New York, or it took poetry to new dimensions where the story becomes the land of struggle and where language is a part of the inheritance of the land, as in the poetry of Maḥmūd Darwīsh.

The Mahjarī literature begins its real history, the return to the homeland is achieved through the texts, where it becomes an integral part of the pre-modern movement in both prose and poetry; the only exception to this is the Prophet of Jibrān, travelling through the American religious heritage and becoming part of orientalisising the orient, outside the history of literature.

In the thirties of the last century, a new wave of tragic emigration took place, thousands of peasants who immigrated to America through Marseille found themselves in Africa. An experience which related the Lebanese emigrant to the French colonial power and created the shame of Lebanese emigration.

Very little literature was written about these two experiences, one can speak of a small numbers of novels, Sa'īd Taqī al-Dīn (1904-1960) and 'Awaḍ Sha'bān and Imilī Naṣr Allāh (*1938), but the story itself must be told.

Maybe one must change the direction of his investigation and open a new chapter related to literature by Arab emigrants written in Spanish, Portuguese, English and French.

Here one must admit that no real attention has been paid to this literature, as if the Syro-Lebanese communities in the Americas and Africa were dominated by the image of the merchant or the owner of grocery stores and restaurants. Although one must admit that the Lebanese cuisine is the major Lebanese cultural success on the international scene, if not the only one.

For me, the most interesting part of this conference is to meet some of these writers and to discuss with them their experiences and the possibilities of translating their works to Arabic.

My knowledge is very small, but I will permit myself to point out some moments which created in me the curiosity to know more and the need for the deep communication which only literature can create.

I want to speak a little about the experience of the Lebanese Brazilian writer Raduan Nassar (*1935). When Nassar speaks about the language of the family as a strange language, and when he describes the death of his sister Hanne after she came back from church to perform her dance, in his novel *An Old Trace*, I felt not the nostalgia but the continuation of the struggle for life here or there. Gabriel García Márquez, when he described the death of Santiago Nasar, took me back to the atmosphere of the 1860 civil war, while Raduan Nassar revived in me the image of the Lebanese woman fighting for her human dignity.

I want to quote the poem of the Chilean poet Mahfud Massis (1916-1990):

I think that I am blind
And everything is falling apart
And Palestine is hanging its last dead man on an olive tree
And you Lebanon, how come you became a waste land.

I want to speak about the Argentinean Gregory Mansour, who lives in Paris since 1965, whose novels take us to the Latin American myths, and about Juan José Saer (*1937), the Syrian-Argentinean writer whose work is on the language and a struggle with it. In his novel *The Son-in-Law*, the Native American character will occupy the scene, and the impact of the Arabic tale will give different versions to the same story.

Writers like David Malouf (*1934), he is maybe the only one translated to Arabic, need to find impact on their culture of origin, and can help us redefine the concept of World literature as an atmosphere where all the strangers, those who are outside their countries, and those who are strangers in their own countries, can meet and create from the diversities of their languages a human unity.